

Environment

Controlled forest fires serve useful purpose



SOMETHING'S BURNING— This prescribed burn Jan. 25 is in the pine stands and open areas on the south end of the Arsenal near the intersection of Patton and Buxton roads.

Photo by Skip Vaughn

Prescribed burns preserve land

GARRISON RELEASE

Smokey Bear has a new message. After more than 50 years of reminding the public that "only you can prevent forest fires," his famous slogan was changed to "only you can prevent wildfires" in 2001. The new slogan is a reflection of the changing attitudes about the role of fire in many ecosystems.

Fire, resulting from lightning strikes, evolved as a natural component of most North American forests. Historical and paleontological records show that Native Americans often used fire to manipulate vegetation composition. European settlement, however, brought with it the attitude that fire is something to be controlled in order to protect forests, prairies and other ecosystems. These attitudes persisted until the 1970s when biologists and land managers began to realize the utility of periodic low intensity fires.

Many native trees and other vegetation are adapted to periodic burning. In fact many plant species are dependent on the heat generated during forest fires for germination. Controlled burns can be used to improve wildlife habitat, control exotic species, inhibit the spread of plant diseases, prepare sites for planting or seeding, and maintain an open understory.

Further, centuries of fire suppression in North American forests, which allowed for the massive accumulation of dead plant material, is thought to be a major contributor to the catastrophic wildfires that have ravaged parts of the U.S. in the last several decades.

A controlled fire (or prescribed burn) has become an established resource management tool used in many ecosystems. Redstone Arsenal has executed a sound controlled burning program since the early 1970s. Recently Redstone became one of a few DoD installations to develop an Installation Wildland Fire Management Plan. The plan, which includes the Annual Prescribed Burning Program on the installation, plays a major role in wildland fire control and prevention.

Under the direction of the installation wildland fire program manager and in coordination with the installation fire department, natural resource personnel within the Environmental Management Division implement the annual Prescribed Burning Program. Of the 38,000 acres on

Redstone approximately 2,000-4,000 acres are scheduled for burning each year as the mission and weather permits. Generally, any one forested area is burned on a three-year rotation to provide optimum forest habitat before hazardous wildland fire conditions begin to occur.

Much of the open land on the missile ranges are burned annually to prevent wildfires, thereby reducing the downtime for range operations and preventing potential damage to adjoining forests. Over the next four or five years some of Redstone's forests will receive annual burns in an attempt to prepare sites for the chemical treatment of kudzu.

In the South, most prescribed burning operations with multiple objectives are performed during the winter months. During this time of the year plant growth has generally gone dormant and the weather conditions are favorable for burning (cool temperatures, high relative humidity, steady northerly winds).

Initially, an area that has been burned makes it difficult to accept the fact that the forests' appearance has been enhanced. But the black appearance of a burned site is usually short-lived and is soon replaced by the new growth of greenery and flowering plants.

The understory will be more open and provide greater visibility within the tree stands. This open or park-like condition improves access through the area for hiking, hunting, timber marking, logging, troop training, and other day-to-day operations in the area.

The more open lower canopy and the reduced leaf litter also result in a dramatic increase in herbaceous vegetation growth on the forest floor.

This increase in vegetation provides an increased food source for many species of wildlife including large species such as deer and turkey to smaller species such as raccoon, rabbit, quail and white-footed mice. Increases in the smaller species in turn provide increased food for predators such as the barred owl, great horned owl, broad-winged hawk, red-tailed hawk and bobcat.

Because prescribed burning provides multiple use benefits and has a natural place in the ecosystem, it will continue to be an important forest management tool.

Wildfire occurrences cannot be completely eliminated from natural areas but prescribed burns can reduce their frequency and intensity thus preserving forest resources for future generations.

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Ronald C. Sykstus

**Attorney at Law
Former U.S. Army Judge Advocate**

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